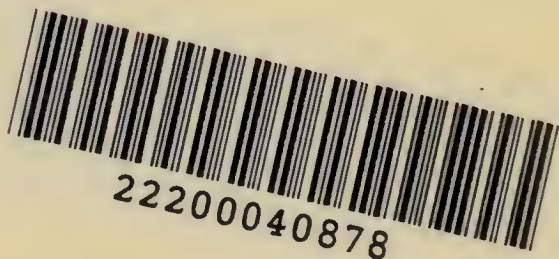


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No. lxvii  
DECORATIVE BOOK-  
BINDING IN IRELAND



Opusculum lxxvii

1914

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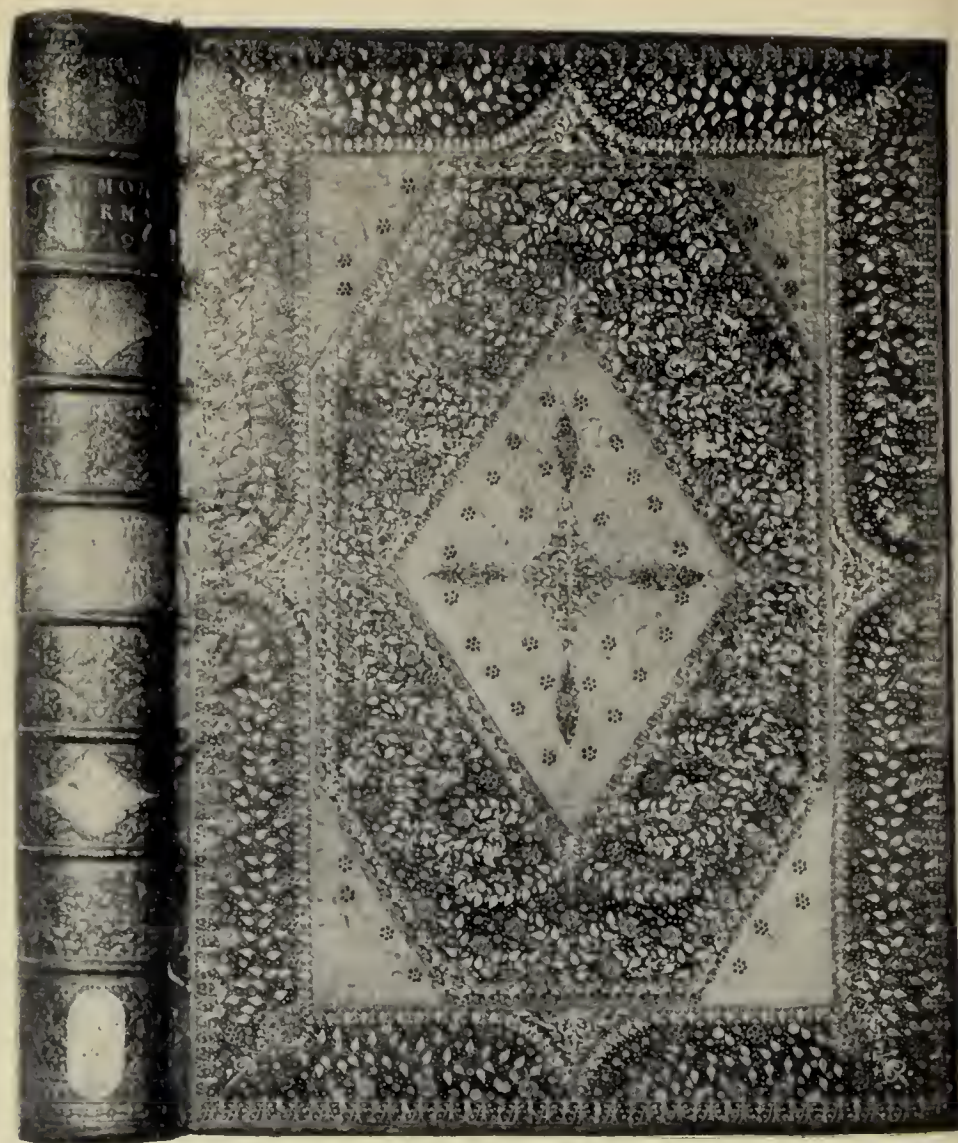
by

Ralph Straus

Sullivan







COMMONS' JOURNAL, 1749.

*Red mor. inlaid. Size, 21 in. by 14 in.*

(A. BRADLEY)

73769

# DECORATIVE BOOK- BINDING IN IRELAND

A PAPER READ BEFORE

Ye Sette of Odd Volumes.

*February 28, 1911, at The Hotel Capitol  
(Oddenino's)*

By SIR EDWARD SULLIVAN, Bart.

*Bookbinder to Ye Sette*



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DULCE EST DESIPERE IN LOCO.

*Horace. Odes, iv, 12.*

DULCE—*Delightful*, says the Poet,  
EST—*is it*, and right well we know it,  
DESIPERE—to *play the fool*  
IN LOCO—*when we're out of school.*

W. M. T.



# DECORATIVE BOOK-BINDING IN IRELAND

IT is a rare thing in these days of prying investigations into the buried past for anyone—even though a member of the Sette of Odd Volumes—to come upon a by-way of history, or of art, where one cannot detect the footprints of some earlier explorer. The satisfaction attending upon the discovery of any such *terra incognita* is always great—and, though it be a daring thing to say, it is in such a direction I think that I have found a small, an interesting, and an undiscovered corner in the artistic world, of which we have heard but little up to now, a description of which should be of some interest.

It may occur to some of my hearers that Bookbinding is hardly a subject sufficiently dignified to be included under the heading of "art"—and indeed, so far as the actual putting together of the sheets of a book, and the enclosing of them in a casing of leather or other material are concerned, those who hold such an opinion are right. But I would point out to

those who have no accurate conception of what Bookbinding may mean, that, according to received tradition, one of the domains of art—and by no means an unimportant one—is *design*, and that I am now dealing with Bookbinding in its highest forms, forms into which artistic designers have at various times contrived to throw their greatest powers, achieving results which, in the beauty of their outline and in the harmony of deftly blended gold and colours, are in no sense inferior to the finest work we know in pottery, wood-carving, metal-chasing, or any of the textile crafts whose very excellence makes it a matter of extreme difficulty to determine the boundary line which really separates Craft from Art.

One might perhaps describe Bookbinding as the younger sister of the Arts, having regard to the fact that she was born only a few centuries ago, at the time when printing first came to be popular in the world. Before that day gold tooling upon bound books, as we understand the term to-day, was practically unknown. Younger sister as she was, however, she has had occasionally in her time all the triumphant

satisfaction of a Cinderella. She has, indeed, become rather a favourite at the Courts of Kings—and that too without the undignified limitations as to time which were imposed in the fairy tale under a twelve o'clock rule.

So much by way of preface. But now to what is the business part of my paper, namely, Ireland's contribution to the craft, or, as I prefer to term it, the art of Bookbinding.

You may look through all the volumes that profess to give us the history of Bookbinding in Europe without finding much enlightenment on the subject of *Irish* work in this branch of artistic expansion.

Every nation of Europe in which *Bibliopegia* has attained notoriety has been ably exploited; but the best work of such a kind done in Ireland has either been unnoticed by writers on the subject of Bookbinding, or confounded with British work, and for the best of good reasons: the compilers of such records had no knowledge that anything worth describing had ever been achieved in that neglected portion of the United Kingdom. The only writer amongst them who says anything of Irish work, so far as I am

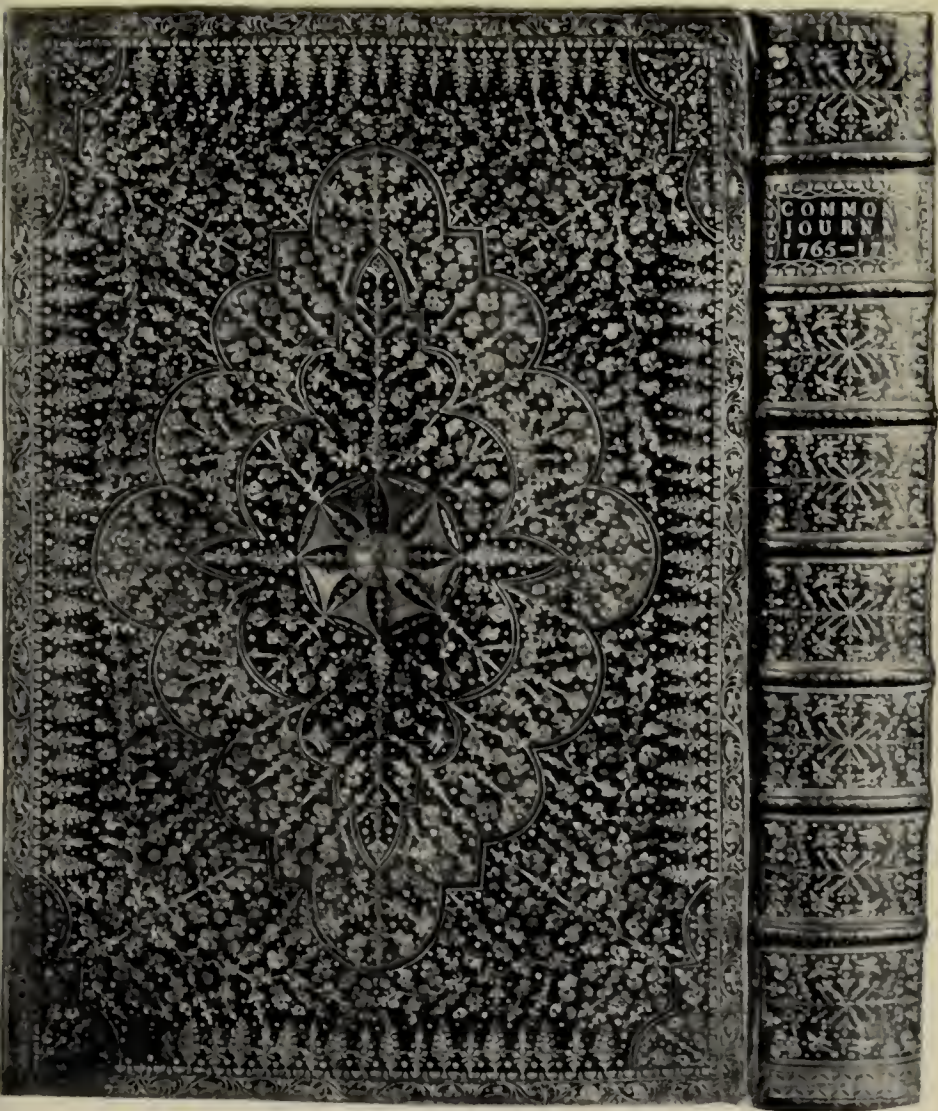
aware, is Mr Weale, the author of the official Catalogue of the *Bookbindings and Rubbings in the National Art Library* in the South Kensington Museum, published in 1898: but, laborious worker as he was on the earlier history of English Bookbinding, his remarks on the Irish work with which he was acquainted are contained in a very few lines.

“Some good bindings were produced at Dublin in the eighteenth century, generally in red morocco inlaid with a lozenge-shaped piece of white leather, richly tooled. At one time the Dublin stationers were highly reputed for their *vellum bindings*.”

And so begins and ends his reference to Irish bibliopegistic achievement.

This scanty tribute to Irish work is all the more remarkable in so much as the South Kensington Museum was one of the very first of the public institutions in this country to exhibit in its cases a small but very creditable collection of Irish bindings.

I may here mention, as an aside, that Mr Weale's allusion to Dublin “vellum bindings”



COMMONS' JOURNAL, 1765-6.  
*Red mor. inlaid. Size, 21 in. by 14½ in.*  
 (A. BRADLEY)



puzzled me a good deal when I read it first, for I have never seen any exceptionally good pieces of Irish work in that material. Later on I discovered what may have been the source of Mr Weale's remark—a letter of Horace Walpole to George Montagu of December 30, 1761, which has a postscript in the words following:

“ P.S.—I am told that they bind in vellum better at Dublin than anywhere; pray bring me any one book of their bindings as well as it can be done, and I will not mind the price. If Mr Bourk's history appears before you return, let it be that.”\*

Walpole writes again on February 25, 1762:

“ And, oh! now you are remembering, don't forget all my prints and a book bound in vellum. . . .”†

For the reason already stated I cannot help thinking that there must be an error of some kind underlying Walpole's request; and I am inclined to believe that he was in all probability

\* *The Letters of Horace Walpole*. Mrs P. Toynbee's ed. vol. v, 162.

† *Ibid*, 183.

referring to the white leather, or vellum, centre-piece so frequently introduced on morocco bindings by the Dublin craftsmen at the time, rather than to purely vellum bindings as we understand the expression to-day.

Mr Salt Brassington, another recent writer, well known as the author of a comprehensive history of Bookbinding, does not seem to be aware that Ireland was a country which could be mentioned in connexion with the subject on which he writes.

The same may be said of others, including Mr Horne who, in a work giving evidence of considerable research,\* has also passed over in silence the work done by Dublin binders.†

\* *The Binding of Books.*

† Instances of neglect of a like kind are to be found in writers on the early Irish manuscript illuminations, as is pointed out by Prof. J. O. Westwood (*Palæographia Sacra Pictoria*. Lond. 1845): "The Irish missionaries brought their national style of art with them from Iona to Lindesfarne in the seventh century, as well as their fine large, very characteristic style of writing; and as these were adopted by their Anglo-Saxon converts, and as most of the manuscripts which have been hitherto described are of Anglo-Saxon origin, it has been the practice to give the name of Anglo-Saxon to this style of art. Thus several of the finest facsimiles given by Astle as Anglo-Saxon are from Irish MSS.; and thus Silvestre,

For all that, I think I can demonstrate that the work that *was* done in Dublin all through the eighteenth century was in no way inferior, in the matter of artistic feeling, design and general workmanship, to the very best work that was at any time produced in England—and England, as we know, has reason to be proud of its taste and good work in Bookbinding from Tudor days even down to the present.

Looked at from a merely national point of view, there is nothing strange or unlikely in such a state of things in Ireland; for anyone conversant with the history of art and artistic craftsmanship generally is aware that Ireland in the eighteenth century had attained a notable distinction in connexion with such matters as painting, engraving, miniatures, interior decoration of houses, wax modelling, and silver chasing; while the Irish medallists, printers (such as Powell and Grierson), sculptors and

who has copied them . . . has fallen into the same error; whilst Wanley, Casely, and others appear never to have had a suspicion of the existence of an ancient school of art in Ireland."

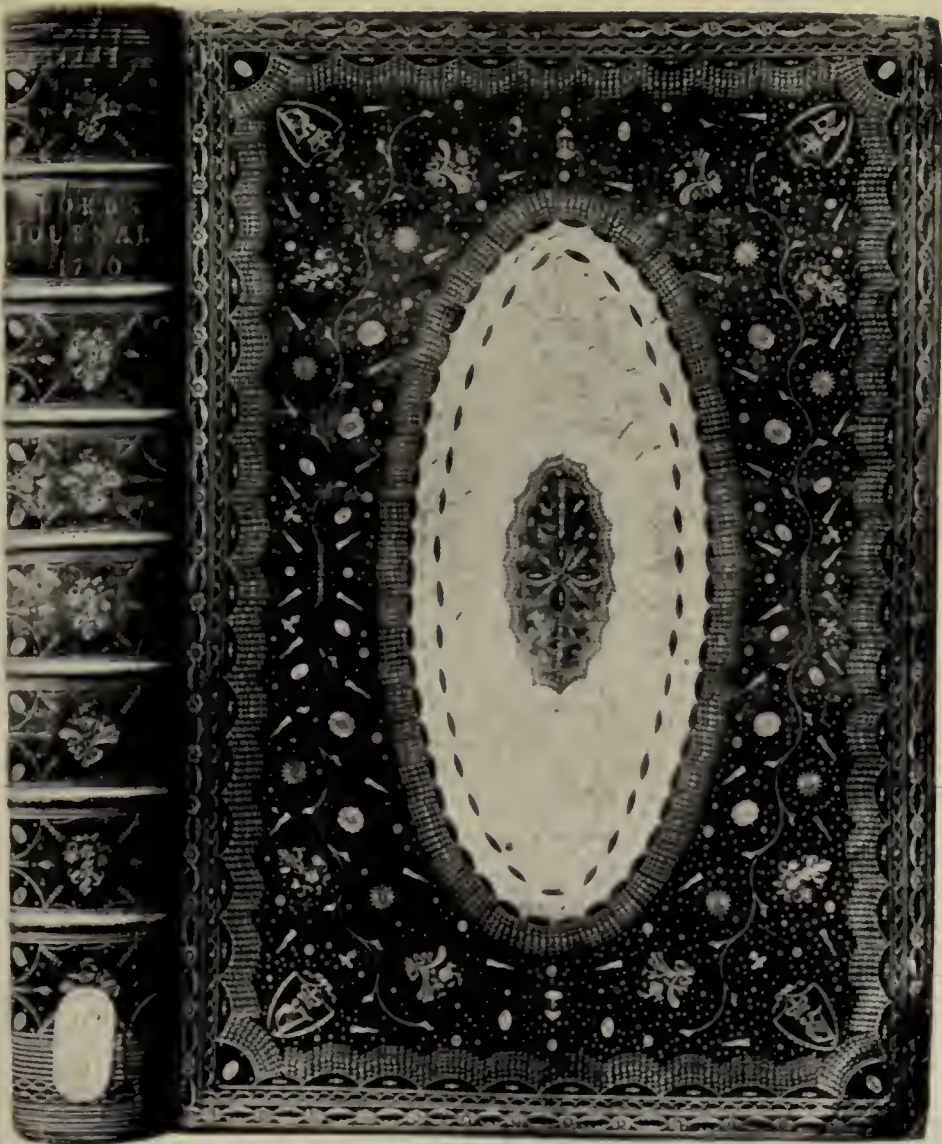
It is satisfactory to know that at the present no such misconceptions are entertained in any quarter.

paper-makers had made themselves a name known a long way outside their own shores.

And so, when we come to examine such examples of decorative Bookbinding as are still to be seen in many of the Irish libraries and in other places throughout the kingdom, we find that the work which *was* done in this department of the arts is of just as notable a type as anything that was accomplished in the other fields of decorative art to which I have referred.

There is, besides, in the best Irish binding that distinctive feature, always interesting in studying national tendencies in art, which stamps its leading characteristics as at once distinguishable from similar work done in any other country. In other words, when at its best, it is always original; so much so, indeed, that it is all but impossible to say what school of binding—English or Continental—or what artistic bias in decorative expression of some other country inspired the amazing versatility and manifest individuality which is associated with the very striking products of Irish effort in this domain.

It is of course possible—as has been suggested



LORDS' JOURNAL, 1790.

*Red mor. inlaid. Size, 21 in. by 14 in.*

(A. B. KING)



before now—that the actual hands who designed and put into execution the earliest of these fine pieces of craftsmanship were of some foreign nationality—but there is in reality no evidence whatever to go upon in support of any such contention. French Huguenots streamed into Dublin, we know, and Italian artisans were extensively employed in the adornment of the best mansions in the Irish capital; while Genevans and other aliens came to Ireland in great numbers: but although some of the first printers in Ireland were described in official papers as citizens of London, the fact remains that hardly any of the *bookbinders* in Dublin seem at any time to have borne names that would suggest a foreign extraction—and the recorded names of bookbinders in Ireland from the year 1600 onwards is considerable.

There is, then, another difficulty connected with this aspect of the subject. The Irish binders, at Ireland's best period, did not make a practice of attaching their names to their work—refusing for some curious reason to follow the example of the many famous Italians, French, Flemish and English craftsmen who constantly stamped

their best work with either their initials or their name and title in full.

Amongst the many specimens of Irish decorated bindings which I have from time to time examined I have never found one up to the end of the eighteenth century which had the binder's name upon it. I am inclined to agree with Mr E. R. McC. Dix, a well-known author on the early typography of Ireland, and who has also made Irish Bookbinding his study, when he says that the name of *McKenzie*, which is found on bindings in the early nineteenth century, is the first instance of such an occurrence.

As a matter of fact, the only information available on the subject of binders' names has to be extracted from contemporary records, official publications, and other documentary evidence of a like kind. Parochial records in Dublin supply us with the names of persons who were married, or who were buried, and who are described in local registers as Bookbinders. The Library Minutes of Trinity College, Dublin, mention the names of binders to whom work was from time to time entrusted; the Minutes and Accounts, too, of Marsh's Library in Dublin,

and those of some other more or less public institutions there furnish additional binders' names; but more important than all these are certain documents, over which I have spent some time, which are to be found in the Public Record Office of Ireland, and which give particulars of payments for the binding of a very special set of volumes connected with the *Transactions* of the Irish Houses of Parliament. These *Journals*, as they were called, were enrolled from session to session in manuscript, and very carefully preserved as the most authentic record of the Parliamentary proceedings. The custom in Ireland of transcribing in MS. and binding these records was nothing different from what it was in old times and is to-day in England—with this great artistic difference in the case of Ireland, that *there* these volumes were from year to year magnificently and luxuriously bound, while in England, as I am informed by the Clerk of Parliaments, they have never up till now been preserved in anything better than an everyday and very ordinary form of binding.

The great value to a student of the History of the art of Bookbinding to be derived from such

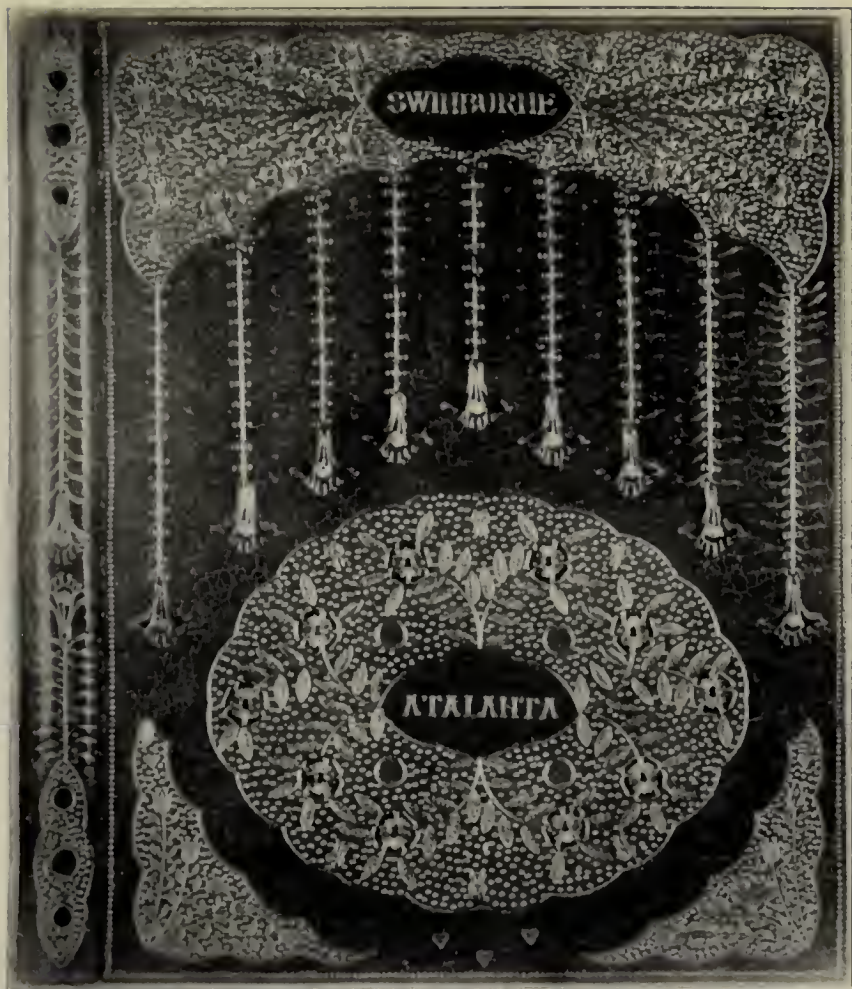
simple matters as the surviving accounts of payments made in connexion with these volumes is very obvious.

We have preserved to-day, for instance, a superbly bound volume of the Irish Parliamentary *Journals* of the year, say, 1727; while the account which plainly refers to this very volume is also in existence, and runs as follows:

“An account of Stationary Ware delivered by Samuel Fairbrother, Stationer to his Maj<sup>ty</sup>, to Enoch Sterne Esq<sup>re</sup>, Clerk of the Upper House of Parliament, for the use of the Most Honble House of Peers of Ireland in the second session of Parliament, in ye third year of the Reign of his Mat<sup>te</sup> King George the Second, held under his Ex<sup>cle</sup> John Lord Carteret Lord Lieu<sup>t</sup> of Ireland and begun the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of September, 1729.”

[Various items of Stationery follow].

1730.	To twelve quires fine Dutch Im-
April 15 <sup>th</sup>	perial Paper for Transcribing the
	fair Journal of the House of
	Lords .. .. . £4 16 0
	To Ruling and Binding the fair



SWINBURNE'S ATALANTA.

*Pale green mor. inlaid.*

( E. SULLIVAN )



---

Journal in Barbary Leather, gilt			
all over	..	..	6 0 0
To one outside Spanish leather			
case	..	..	6 0

The certificate of delivery is signed at the end "En. Sterne Cler. Parliamentor. 17. April 1730"; and at foot, in another hand, are the words "a true copy. Ed. Dering."

And then we find a similar account sent in by the same *Sam<sup>l</sup> Fairbrother* to the proper officer of the House of Commons of Ireland, under the same date, for (*inter alia*) "Ruling and Binding the fair Journal in Barbary leather Gilt all over" at the same rate of charge as in the previous case, with a certificate at foot signed by Richard Povey, Chief Sergeant at Arms.

The two bound volumes are in existence, and may be seen to-day at the Record Office in Dublin; and although the design in each case is different, the same stamps, or tools, are in many instances to be found on both the bindings.

So here we have in the case of two bound books the most authentic demonstration of the fact that a certain design, composed of certain

tools, was the work of a certain Dublin Bookbinder, and that his name was Sam<sup>l</sup> Fairbrother.

If, to go a step further, we find that the stamps used on these two volumes are different from anything to be found on books bound at about the same time in England or abroad, we have at once, within a limited period, the means of differentiating an Irish from any contemporary English or Continental design in Bookbinding. But inasmuch as the example I have taken is only a single sample of many that might be adduced, you can see that by the extension of such a process of comparative investigation it is an easy matter at all times to distinguish Irish work from that of any other country.

It will be manifest also to anyone who has made a study of style in bookbinding designs that there are many other means of identifying the *provenance* of some particular piece of work besides the stamps and the patterns into which they are distributed in composition. Amongst such minor evidences may be mentioned the occasional use of marbled inlays (an extremely rare form in mosaic work); splashings of black stainings over the ground leather; and peculiari-

ties of colour and pattern in the end-papers; each of which indications, in combination with some recognized Irish stamps, may at once lead to the identification of an Irish piece of work.

But to return to the historical aspect of the subject at large.

It will be understood that until after the invention of printing, in about the middle of the fifteenth century, there was hardly anything in the nature of bookbinding, in the modern sense of the term, in any quarter of the world. The manuscripts that were the books of our forebears were undoubtedly *bound*, but their bindings bear so little resemblance to the work subsequently done that all earlier forms may be left out of present consideration.

Yet even in this more ancient form Ireland supplies us with the first recorded name of a bookbinder in the Christian age. We learn from the " *Acta Sanctorum* " that a monk, Dagaeus, bound books there in an early age—his death is elsewhere mentioned as taking place in the year A.D. 587. Ultan, too, is described as a bookbinder of the ninth century; while Alcuin Donnchadh

son of Flann, is similarly referred to about the middle of the tenth century.

Another eminent craftsman in the same line was Assicus, Bishop of Elphin, who, as Professor Bury tells us in his *Life of St Patrick*, was "a skillful worker in bronze, and used to make for Patrick altars and cases for books."\*

The original loss of what is perhaps the finest illuminated manuscript in the world was attributed to the attractive magnificence of its binding in gold studded with precious stones. When the volume was afterwards found, having been abandoned by the thieves who had carried it off, it was without its cover. I refer to the famous Book of Kells.

Printing came into Ireland at an extremely late period—in 1551—seventy-seven years after the appearance of the first Caxton, and nearly 100 years later than the first German printed book—and, no doubt for this reason, Book-binding, in the modern acceptation of the word, was also a tardy product of the artistic feelings

\* These cases for books, or *cumdachs* as they were called in Irish, usually took the form of highly-ornamented metal caskets inlaid with precious stones.

of the western island. In the matter of the history of Bookbinding, its quaint and crude beginnings, its rapid development into something genuinely artistic, and its subsequent decline—Ireland, for the reasons I am about to mention, provides us with a better pictorial representation of development than any other country that we know; for, in addition to numerous examples of first-class Irish work to be found scattered through many Public and Private Libraries, there is to-day preserved in the Public Record Office in Dublin that set of bound volumes to which I have already made a passing reference, containing the original manuscript *Journals*, of the Irish Houses of Parliament, Lords and Commons, running continuously from the year 1613 to 1800 when the Act of Union was passed, and which necessarily brought the series to a close. It was apparently with a view of giving them the full importance belonging to records of the kind that the Irish Parliament wisely determined to preserve them in fitting bindings. There are 149 volumes in this set, each of which was as a rule bound within a few years of the time when the transcript was

completed, the design in each year differing from that of every other year. Six volumes are missing. They were originally 155 in number. With a few exceptions they are bound in red morocco, folio in size, standing about 22 inches high.

The first few bindings of the series suggest that the craft was in its infancy in Ireland when they were returned from the binder to the Houses of Parliament; and the very fact that the binding of the first few volumes is of a rough and very ordinary character suggests very strongly to my mind that the art *was learnt in the country* and was not the result of importing English or foreign craftsmen, whose work at this early part of the seventeenth century was of a much superior kind. Before very long, however, the *Journals*, as they came back from the binder, gave ample proof that there was something more than ordinary in the growing artistic spirit that was employed in their decoration, which, starting from insignificant beginnings, broke, some years later, into an almost premature blossom of magnificent luxuriance, and flourished in the same high state unchecked



BOOKBINDING IN FRANCE.

*Chocolate mor. inlaid.*

(E. SULLIVAN)



through at least 100 years. One should remember that although the series commences in 1613, the Irish Parliament did not meet with any great regularity till towards the end of the seventeenth century, and so the earlier volumes appeared at wide intervals.

Considerable information of a reliable kind may be found in connexion with this long set of Irish-bound volumes in official publications. The *Liber Munerum Publicorum Hiberniæ*, for instance, supplies us with a full list of all persons from time to time in the pay of the government, including, of course, the names of the King's Printers and King's Stationers in Ireland, with the dates of their appointments. The emoluments attaching to these offices were large; and the offices themselves were granted by Patent from the Crown; the grant being made out in the name of the Patentee, or (occasionally) his deputy. No other persons were allowed to do any work mentioned in the Patent for the Government. Stationery at the time included Bookbinding—as was the case in England also—and so, under the prevailing official system, we know almost exactly the persons who were en-

trusted with the binding of the *Journals* from the beginning to the end of the period during which the best Irish work was being done.

I say *almost* exactly—for it at times happened, for one reason or another, that the King's Printer was, under his Patent, permitted to do bookbinding work as well as the King's Stationer—as in the case of Boulter Grierson, a volume of whose binding, now in the British Museum, you will see later on the screen.

In some such cases, however, I have succeeded in finding in the Record Office in Dublin (with the aid of some members of the very efficient and obliging staff there) the original accounts of the payment for the binding of the *Journal* for a particular year—which puts beyond all question the binder of the volume, as in the case I have mentioned already in reference to the *Journals* for 1727.

The *King's Stationers* from October 22, 1692, when the first King's Stationer was appointed, until the date of the ending of the Irish Parliament under the Act of Union, were as follows:

1692. Robt. Thornton.

1705. Robt. Thornton again; but Joseph Ray

(? as "deputy") did some government binding at this period.

1718. Nicholas King.

1723. Samuel Fairbrother.

1749. Abraham Bradley.

1780. Abraham Bradley and Abraham Bradley King (his grandson).

1784. Ab. King.

1801. Ab. King, Printer and Stationer to House of Commons.

Before showing on the screen a selection of the bindings of some of the Parliamentary *Journals*, I should like to let you see what may be the very earliest example of a decorated leather casing for a book to be found in the United Kingdom—the famous Satchel of the Book of Armagh, in Trinity College, Dublin. It is made of a single strip of tanned hide, black in colour, 36 inches long by 12½ wide, folded in flap form, and embossed all over in characteristic Irish ornamentation. The MS. it contains is of unique rarity—the only Latin version of the New Testament which has come to us complete from the ancient Irish Church. It was

believed to have been written by St Patrick himself.\*

Moving on now to much more recent times, we come to the age of gold tooling on book-covers in Ireland.

The first volume of the Parliamentary series, containing the *Journal* for the years 1613 to 1615, is clad in an unpretentious binding of brown calf, splashed with black, and slightly tooled with gold, having no features different from the everyday decoration used in England about that time. It was the same with the next eleven volumes which contain the records of the Irish Parliament up to the year 1707—almost one century. But it should be remembered that

\* The description given by the Hon. R. Curzon, junr. (*Visits to Monasteries in the Levant*, Lond. 1849), of the Abyssinian Library in the Monastery of Souriani, on the Natron Lakes in Egypt, shows that this system of encasing books is still in use in the East, from whence the Irish custom was perhaps originally derived. An illustration in the work mentioned displays a number of such satchels suspended by a strap from wooden pegs let into the wall of the room which served as library. Out of doors the strap was slung over the monk's shoulder. Carved representations of Celtic monks with satchels so suspended may be seen on the Papil stone cross from Shetland, now in the Edinburgh Museum (see *The Studio*, Aug. 15, 1898).

Parliament met very infrequently during that turbulent hundred years, and so there was little to chronicle, and consequently little to bind.

With the volume containing the *Journal* of the House of Commons for 1707 begins a more luxuriant form of ornamentation, which, in the years that followed, blossomed into an astounding magnificence.

Joseph Ray, of Dublin, Deputy King's Stationer in Ireland from 1705 to 1718 is, I think, entitled to a large share of credit for raising bookbinding at the time to something in the nature of a fine art.

With him commenced, so far as the *Commons' Journals* are concerned, the use of the best morocco, or, as it was then called, Barbary leather, coupled with decorative forms of a much higher kind than had been attempted before his time in Ireland.

[A series of lantern-slides were here exhibited on the screen, illustrating a selection of Irish decorative bindings.

Of the Parliamentary *Journals* the following were shown:

*Commons' Journal*, 1707.

*Commons' Journal*, 1713.

*Lords' Journal*, 1717-19.

*Lords' Journal*, 1634. Possibly bound at a later date.

*Lords' Journal*, 1743. A most exquisite example; admirable in design, balanced in colour, and full of that artistic restraint which is only reached by the very highest masters of the craft. Obviously the work of Abraham Bradley.

*Lords' Journal*, 1745. Equally fine. Inlaid richly in colours in the same way as the last.

*Commons' Journal*, 1747. Bradley again at his best. A reproduction of this work in gold and colours by Griggs was presented by the reader of the Paper to the Brethren and Guests.

*Commons' Journal*, 1749. (See Plate I.)

*Commons' Journal*, 1753.

*Commons' Journal*, 1757.

*Lords' Journal*, 1759. An instance of a design in interlaced strapwork.

*Commons' Journal*, 1757-60. Pattern somewhat similar to the preceding.

*Commons' Journal*, 1765-6. (See Plate II.)

*Commons' Journal*, 1785. The first example shown of the Parliamentary series containing no



KEATS' SONNETS.

*Red mor. inlaid. Size, 9 $\frac{3}{4}$  in by 6 $\frac{1}{4}$  in.*

(E. SULLIVAN)



inlaying. Scotch influence is apparent in the pattern.

*Lords' Journal*, 1790. (See Plate III.)

*Lords' Journal*, 1791.

*Lords' Journal*, 1793. Showing the "flame" ornamentation frequently found on Irish work towards the end of the eighteenth century.

*Commons' Journal*, 1795. A good example of the fan pattern frequent in Italian bindings.

*Commons' Journal*, 1796.

The bindings other than Parliamentary included Buck Whalley's *Memoirs*, original MS., 2 vols, red morocco inlaid, bound c. 1800.

Baskerville Bible, 1765, folio. Red morocco. Probably used as the House of Lords' Bible.

Book of Common Prayer, Dublin, 1750 (British Museum). Red morocco. White oval centre-piece, with smaller oval spaces left open showing the red ground through. Inlaid corners.

*Irish Statutes*, Dublin, 1765 (British Museum). Red morocco. Inlaid centre-piece in white and green.

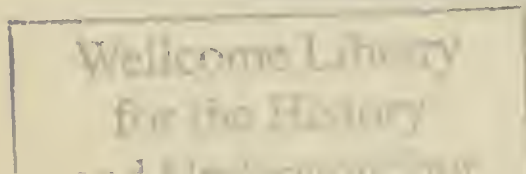
Examples of the Lecturer's own work, three of which are reproduced. (See Plates IV, V, VI.)

In the early nineteenth century the art of

bookbinding seems to have become moribund in Ireland. The old craftsmen quickly disappeared, and only a few new names, such as McKenzie, Mullen, and one or two others, are worthy of mention as artistic binders. None of them can for a moment be compared with the master spirits who had preceded them.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century a certain Irish lover of well-bound books took it into his head to study in a practical way the interesting processes by which decorative bookbindings are produced. He has worked at it intermittently ever since in his own amateurish way, endeavouring all the time to keep before his eyes that artistic standard without which no good work can ever be accomplished. Whatever success or satisfaction of a personal kind may have come to him from the exercise of this fascinating hobby, he is much indebted to those present to-night for their appreciation of such examples of his own designs and work as he has shown upon the screen. "The rest is silence." Some *other* writer upon Irish binding must say whatever may be said of the efforts of "E. S. Aurifex,"

YOUR BRO. BOOKBINDER.





LEITCHWORTH: AT THE ARDEN PRESS



